

# PORTION SIZES FOR CHILDREN 1-4 YEARS

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## LEARNING POINTS

- 1 Young children need a nutritious balanced diet to meet their nutritional needs for activity, growth and development
- 2 A balanced combination of foods from all five food groups makes up a healthy diet for young children
- 3 The amount of food that young children eat varies widely from day to day and meal to meal. Young children do not eat set portion sizes
- 4 This Factsheet recommends food portion size ranges designed to ensure that the energy and nutrient requirements of young children (except for vitamin D) are all met. Children under five years all need a supplement of vitamin D
- 5 These portion size ranges can be used to guide how much food to offer children aged 1-4 years
- 6 Young children should be encouraged to eat to their appetite from at least three of the five food groups but need to be limited in the amounts they consume of milk and milk products and of the foods high in fat and sugar listed in food group 5
- 7 Parents can be reassured that if young children are eating within the range of portion sizes of a particular food, then they are eating an adequate amount of that food.

# FOOD, NUTRIENTS AND PORTION SIZES

Children aged 1-4 need a nutritious balanced diet to meet their nutritional needs for activity, growth and development.

A nutritious diet in the early years is made up of a combination of foods from the five food groups:

1. Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods,
2. Fruit and vegetables,
3. Milk, cheese and yogurt,
4. Meat, fish, eggs, nuts and pulses, and
5. Foods high in fat and sugar.

**Factsheet 1.2** describes how many portions from each of these five food groups toddlers need to thrive and grow.

The tables in this Factsheet provide guidance on a suitable range of portion sizes for each of the foods within each food group for young children<sup>1</sup>.

Precise or fixed portion sizes are not useful for young children because the amount of food they eat varies considerably from meal to meal and from day to day. This Factsheet therefore suggests the range of portion sizes for a variety of foods that are suitable for 2-4 year olds. In general taller and more active children will eat larger portions of some foods than smaller, less active children.

These portion size ranges have been developed by comparing them with reported average amounts eaten by healthy young children<sup>2,3,4,5,6</sup>. The energy and nutrient content of daily combinations of a variety of the foods from the tables in this Factsheet have been calculated using the midpoint of the portion size range. These daily combinations comply with healthy eating guidelines for toddlers (1-4 year olds) in **Factsheets 1.1 & 1.2** and meet the UK estimated average energy requirements<sup>7</sup> and Reference Nutrient Intakes (RNIs) for all nutrients except vitamin D which is not expected to be met by food alone<sup>8</sup>. **See Factsheet 1.1i**

## Toddlers 12-24 months

Portion sizes for very young toddlers aged 12-24 months are those at the lower end of the ranges in the following tables. The energy requirements of these young toddlers are considerably lower than those for children two years and over. Hence we recommend that toddlers under two years of age are not offered sweet drinks, confectionery, chocolate or savoury snacks such as crisps as listed in Food Group 5 on page 9.

## Vitamin D

Most of young child's vitamin D needs are met not by diet, but by synthesis in the skin. The National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) and the Department of

Health recommend a daily supplement of vitamin D (and vitamin A) for all children under five years in the UK in addition to eating a balanced diet<sup>9</sup>.

**See Factsheet 1.2**

## Allow young children to eat to their appetite

Young children should be allowed to eat to their appetite from the food groups 1, 2 and 4 and allowed to stop eating when they have had enough.

They should not be urged to finish everything on their plate or to eat more than they wish to. Signals that young children have had enough are:

- shutting their mouths,
- turning their heads away,
- pushing the spoon or plate aside,
- refusing to swallow and holding food in their mouths,
- spitting food out,
- screaming or crying,
- gagging or vomiting. **See Factsheet 2.2**

Parents can be reassured that when young children eat a variety of foods in amounts within the range of portion sizes presented in this Factsheet, they are eating adequately. Knowing that the small portion sizes of some foods at the lower end of the ranges are adequate can reassure parents who worry that their young children are not eating enough of certain foods.

## Food Group 3: Milk, cheese and yogurt

Some young children may drink too much milk and thus reduce their appetite for the iron-containing foods in the food groups 1, 2 and 4. Milk, cheese and yogurt should be limited to about three portions per day in the amounts specified in the MILK, CHEESE AND YOGURT table, on page 5, to reduce the risk of a low intake of iron.

Discontinuing milk from a bottle at around 12 months reduces the risk of:

- bottles becoming a comfort
- an excess consumption of milk.

Infants can begin drinking from a cup after about six months of age.

## Food Group 5: Foods high in fat and sugar

Small portion sizes have been recommended for some of the foods in this food group because these low nutrient, energy-dense foods should be limited to prevent tooth decay, overweight and obesity. **See Factsheet 3.3 & 4.5** Young children have an innate preference for these energy-dense, and often sweet, foods. They can be included in small amounts in a balanced diet but should not be given as rewards, bribes or for comfort. **See Factsheet 2.3**

# THE PORTION SIZE RANGES

The tables that follow cover each of the five food groups. [See Factsheet 1.2](#) The foods are listed in the first column, with the portion sizes (lower and upper ends of ranges) in the second column. Standard measures have been used: 1 tablespoon is a 15ml spoon and 1 teaspoon is a 5ml spoon.

## FOOD GROUP 1: BREAD, RICE, POTATOES, PASTA AND OTHER STARCHY FOODS

Offer a serving at each meal and some snacks

BREADS	Range of portion sizes
Bagel	¼ - ½ bagel
Bread roll	¼ - ¾ roll
Bread slices – fresh or toasted	½ - 1 medium slice
Bread sticks	1 - 3 large breadsticks
Bun (e.g. hot cross)*	¼ - ½ bun
Chapatti	½ - 1 chapatti
Cream / wholemeal crackers	1 - 3 crackers
Crispbread	½ - 2 crispbreads
Crumpet	¼ - 1 crumpet
Maltloaf*	½ - 1 slice
Naan bread	⅛ - ⅓ naan
Oatcakes	1 - 2 oatcakes
Pitta bread	½ - 1 mini or ¼ - ½ pitta
Rice cakes	1 - 3 medium rice cakes
Scone	½ - 1 small scone
Teabread*	½ - 1½ slices
Tortilla	¼ - ½ large tortilla

BREAKFAST CEREALS	Range of portion sizes
Dry flaked cereals (e.g. cornflakes / Rice Krispies™ / Cheerios™)*	3 - 6 heaped tablespoons
Muesli*	2 - 4 tablespoons
Porridge / Ready Brek™ made up with milk / water	5 - 8 tablespoons
Wheat biscuits (e.g. Weetabix™)*	½ - 1½ biscuits



4 heaped tablespoons of cornflakes.

COUSCOUS, PASTA, POTATOES & RICE	Range of portion sizes
Cassava / plantain – boiled or fried	1 - 3 tablespoons
Couscous (cooked)	2 - 4 heaped tablespoons
Noodles (cooked)	½ - 1 small cup
Pasta (cooked)	2 - 5 tablespoons
Pasta in tomato sauce (e.g. spaghetti hoops in tomato sauce)	2 - 4 tablespoons
<b>Potatoes</b>	
baked	¼ - ½ medium potato
boiled	½ - 1½ egg-sized potatoes
chips	4 - 8 thick-cut chips
croquettes	1 - 2 mini croquettes
mashed	1 - 4 tablespoons
roast	½ - 1 small potato
waffles	½ - 1 waffle
wedges	2 - 4 medium wedges
Rice – boiled or fried	2 - 5 tablespoons

Foods marked with an asterisk (\*) should be limited to mealtimes and no more than one snack per day because of their sugar content. [See Factsheet 4.5](#)

## FOOD GROUP 2: FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

**Offer at least 1 - 2 servings at each meal and also offer them with some snacks**

These are low energy, high nutrient foods - allow young children to eat larger portions if they wish to.

FRUITS	Range of portion sizes
Apple	1/4 - 1/2 medium apple
Avocado	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Banana	1/4 - 1 medium banana
Clementine / tangerine / mandarin	1/2 - 1 fruit
Dried apricots / prunes*	1 - 4 whole fruits
Dried fruit snack bar*	1/2 - 1 (15g) bar
Fruit salad	1/2 - 1 small bowl
Grapes and berries (e.g. blackberries / blueberries / raspberries / strawberries)	3 - 10 small grapes / berries
Kiwifruit / plum / apricot	1/2 - 1 fruit
Mango	1/4 - 1/2 mango
Melon	1/4 - 1 thin slice
Orange	1/4 - 1/2 orange
Peach / nectarine	1/4 - 1 whole fruit
Pear	1/4 - 3/4 whole fruit
Pineapple	1/4 - 1 medium slice
Raisins / sultanas*	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Stewed fruit / tinned fruit / fruit puree	2 - 4 tablespoons



1/3 medium banana.

Foods marked with an asterisk (\*) should be limited to mealtimes and no more than one snack per day because of their sugar content. [See Factsheet 4.5](#)



3 small florets of broccoli.

VEGETABLES	Range of portion sizes
Bamboo shoots	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Beetroot	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Broccoli / cauliflower	1 - 4 small florets or 1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Brussels sprouts	1/2 - 3 sprouts
Cabbage	1 - 3 tablespoons
Carrot	1 - 3 tablespoons / 2 - 6 carrot sticks
Celery / cucumber / radishes / peppers / other salad vegetables	2 - 8 small sticks / slices
Cherry tomatoes	1 - 4 cherry tomatoes
Courgettes / squash / okra / aubergine	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Green / French beans	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Leeks / onions / shallots	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Lettuce	1 - 2 small leaves
Mange tout	2 - 8 mange touts
Mixed vegetables	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Mushrooms	1 - 4 button mushrooms
Parsnip	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Peas	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Spring greens / spinach (cooked)	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Stir fried or roasted vegetables	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Swede / turnip	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Sweet corn	1/2 - 2 tablespoons
Tomato	1/4 - 1 small tomato
Vegetable soup	1/2 - 1 small bowl (60 - 125ml)

## FOOD GROUP 3: MILK, CHEESE AND YOGURT

### Serve about 3 times each day

An excess of these foods can reduce the appetite for iron-containing foods from the other food groups so limit serving sizes to those indicated. Milk should be given in a cup, mug or glass - not a bottle.

See Factsheet 1.2 Semi skimmed milk can be used from two years of age and skimmed milk from five years of age for children who eat a wide variety of foods.



125ml pot of yogurt.

MILK	Range of portion sizes
Breast milk	5 - 10 minutes breastfeeding
Cow's milk as a drink	1 cup of milk (100 - 120 ml / 3 - 4oz)
Flavoured milk (e.g. chocolate / strawberry)*	1 cup of milk (100 - 120 ml / 3 - 4oz)
Formula milk, Growing Up milk or Calcium enriched soya milk*	1 cup of milk (100 - 120 ml / 3 - 4oz)

YOGURTS AND MILK PUDDINGS	Range of portion sizes
Yogurt	1 average pot (125ml)
Fromage frais	2 small pots (60g each)
Calcium enriched soya dessert*	1 average pot (125ml)
Custard*	5 - 7 tablespoons
Milk pudding*	4 - 6 tablespoons
Rice pudding*	2 - 5 tablespoons



120ml of milk.

CHEESE	Range of portion sizes
Cheese sauce	1 - 4 tablespoons
Cheddar / Edam / Parmesan / Brie / Camembert / Mozzarella	in a sandwich or as a pizza topping
Cottage / ricotta cheese	½ - 1 tablespoon in a sandwich
Grated cheese	2 - 4 tablespoons as a pizza topping or in a sandwich
Processed cheese	15 - 21g (1 slice / 1 triangle or string / 1 Mini Babybel™)
Spreadable cheese	thickly spread on a slice of bread



1 Mini Babybel™ (20g).

Foods marked with an asterisk (\*) should be limited to mealtimes and no more than one snack per day because of their sugar content. See Factsheet 4.5

## FOOD GROUP 4: MEAT, FISH, EGGS, NUTS AND PULSES

**Serve 2 - 3 times per day** – twice for young children eating meat and fish and 3 times a day for vegetarians

MEAT	Range of portion sizes
Bacon	¼ - 1 rasher
Beef	½ - 1 slice
Beef burger / lamb burger without bun	¼ - 1 small burger
Chicken	1 - 2 small slices
Chicken drumsticks	½ - 1 drumstick
Chicken nuggets	2 - 4 small nuggets
Chicken / turkey burger without bun	¼ - 1 small burger
Duck	1 - 2 slices of breast meat
Frankfurter	½ - 1 small frankfurter
Ham	½ - 1½ small slices 1½ - 4 wafer thin slices
Lamb	½ - 1 slice
Lamb's liver	½ - 1 thin slice
Liver pate	1 - 2 tablespoons
Minced meat	2 - 5 tablespoons
Pork	½ - 2 small slices
Rabbit	1 - 2 slices
Salami	1 - 2 slices
Sausages	¼ - 1 medium sausage
Sausages – cocktail	1 - 3 cocktail sausages
Turkey	1 - 2 slices of breast or dark meat



3 tablespoons of cooked minced meat.



1 tablespoon of tuna mayonnaise.

FISH	Range of portion sizes
Fish: white / oily fresh fish	¼ - 1 small fillet or 1 - 3 tablespoons
Shell fish: prawns, mussels etc	½ - 2 tablespoons
Taramasalata	1 - 2 tablespoons
Tinned fish in a sandwich / salad (e.g. tuna / salmon / sardines)	½ - 1½ tablespoons

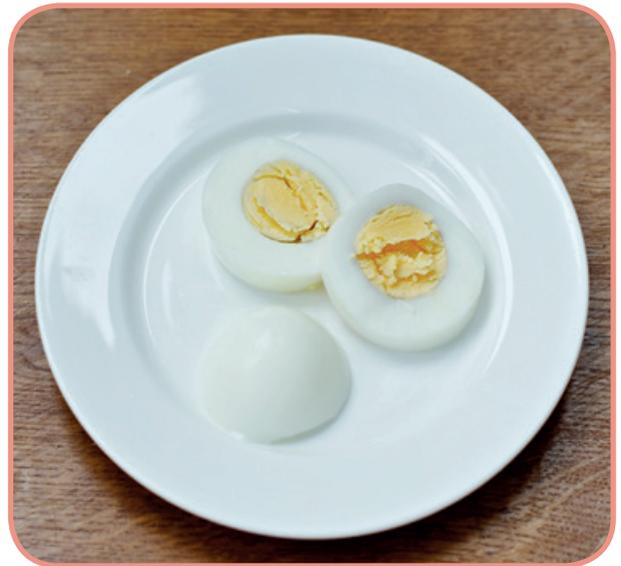


1 small slice of ham.

EGGS	Range of portion sizes
Omelette (1 egg)	½ - 1 omelette
Poached / boiled / fried	½ - 1 egg
Scrambled egg	2 - 4 tablespoons

NUTS	Range of portion sizes
Ground, chopped or crushed nuts	1 - 2 tablespoons
Peanut butter or other nut butters	½ - 1 tablespoon or thinly spread on bread

PULSES	Range of portion sizes
Baked beans in tomato sauce	2 - 4 tablespoons
Bhajis or pakora made with chickpea flour	½ - 1½ bhajis or pakoras
Chickpeas / hummus	1 - 2 tablespoons
Dhal / cooked lentils	2 - 4 tablespoons
Falafels	1 - 3 mini falafels (25g each)
Red kidney beans / bean salad / other starchy beans	2 - 4 tablespoons
Tofu	2 - 4 tablespoons



½ a boiled egg.

SOUPS	Range of portion sizes
Homemade soups with meat / fish / pulses	1 small bowl (90 - 125ml)



1 small bowl of soup (90 - 125ml).



3 ½ tablespoons of baked beans on toast.

## FOOD GROUP 5: FOODS HIGH IN FAT AND SUGAR

### Biscuits, cakes and puddings - include once a day

These foods add enjoyment to meals and snacks but as they are high energy, low nutrient foods the maximum serving size should be limited to the upper end of the range. Cake or biscuit can be served with fruit to make a nutritious pudding. Sugary foods can cause tooth decay when given on more than four occasions per day. [See Factsheet 4.5](#)

BISCUITS, CAKES AND PUDDINGS	Range of portion sizes
<b>Biscuit</b>	
chocolate coated*	½ - 1 biscuit
digestive (plain)*	½ - 1 biscuit
fruit (e.g. garibaldi)*	1 - 2 biscuits
plain (e.g. rich tea / ginger nut)*	1 - 2 biscuits
sandwich (e.g. bourbon / custard cream)*	½ - 1 biscuit
<b>Cake</b>	
cake-style pudding with fruit (e.g. apple sponge cake)*	2 - 4 tablespoons
cake-style pudding without fruit (e.g. sticky toffee pudding)*	2 - 4 tablespoons
cup cake*	½ - 1 (25g) cup cake
fruit cake*	½ - 1 slice
madeira / swiss roll / sponge*	¼ - ½ slice
Cereal bar*	½ - 1 (20g) bar
Chocolate mousse*	1 - 3 tablespoons
Croissant (plain)	½ - 1 (45g) pastry
Danish pastry / chocolate croissant*	¼ - ½ medium pastry
Fruit crumble (e.g. apple or rhubarb crumble)*	2 - 4 tablespoons
Fruit pie or tart (e.g. apple pie / apricot tart)*	½ - 1 small slice
Fruit sorbet / smoothie*	2 - 3 tablespoons
Ice cream*	2 - 3 heaped tablespoons
Jelly*	2 - 4 tablespoons
Muffin*	⅛ - ¼ of a large (125g) muffin
Pancake*	½ - 1 small pancake
Trifle*	2 - 4 tablespoons



2 heaped tablespoons of ice cream with fruit.

### Fats and oils

Include 2 servings per day to enhance flavour of meals and provide essential fats.

FATS AND OILS	Range of portion sizes
Butter / margarine	thinly spread - 1 teaspoon
Double cream	1 tablespoon
Mayonnaise / salad cream / oil & vinegar dressing	1 - 2 teaspoons
Oil for frying – rapeseed oil is best	1 teaspoon

### Sauces and sweet and savoury spreads

Include 1 serving per day to add flavour and enjoyment to a meal.

SAUCES AND SWEET AND SAVOURY SPREADS	Range of portion sizes
Chocolate spread*	thinly spread - 1 teaspoon
Gravy	1 - 2 tablespoons
Honey / jam / marmalade / syrup*	thinly spread - 1 teaspoon
Tomato ketchup / brown or BBQ sauce	1 - 2 teaspoons

Foods marked with an asterisk (\*) should be limited to mealtimes and no more than one snack per day because of their sugar content. [See Factsheet 4.5](#)

**High energy foods that can be offered occasionally in limited amounts**

Limit these foods to occasional meals – no more than one item once a week. Do not use as a reward, treat or to comfort a child.

CONFECTIONERY	Range of portion sizes
Bar of chocolate / chocolate-coated biscuit bar*	2 - 4 squares or a funsize chocolate bar
Chocolate buttons*	6 - 8 small buttons
Ice lolly*	1/4 - 1/2 small ice lolly
Popcorn - sweet*	1/2 - 1 small cup
Soft sweets (e.g. jelly tots / jelly beans)*	2 - 4 sweets

SWEET DRINKS	Range of portion sizes
Diluted squashes*	100 - 120ml / 3 - 4oz
Fruit juices*	100 - 120ml / 3 - 4oz

For more information on sugary foods, See Factsheet 4.5

SAVOURY SNACKS	Range of portion sizes
Bombay mix	1 - 3 teaspoons
Corn / Tortilla chips	4 - 6 chips
Crisps and packet snacks (e.g. Wotsits™ / Hula hoops™)	4 - 6 crisps / Wotsits™ / Hula hoops™
French fries - thin (fast food)	6 - 10 fries
Fried flatbreads (e.g. puris / parathas)	1/8 - 1/4 small puris or parathas
Popcorn - unsweetened	1/2 - 1 small cup
Poppadoms	1/2 - 1 poppadom
Vegetable crisps	4 - 6 crisps



3 jelly beans.



3 squares of chocolate.



5 crisps.



1 small cup of popcorn.

## PORTIONS WITH FOODS FROM MORE THAN ONE FOOD GROUP

The food groups included in each portion are shown in the third column of each table.

CASSEROLES, CURRIES, STEW OR STIR FRY	Range of portion sizes	Food groups
Meat / chicken / fish / pulses with vegetable based sauce and potatoes	3 - 6 tablespoons	1, 2 and 4
Meat / chicken / fish / pulses with vegetable based sauce without potatoes	2 - 5 tablespoons	2 and 4

FISH PRODUCTS	Range of portion sizes	Food groups
Fish battered or in breadcrumbs	1 - 3 heaped tablespoons	4 and 5
Fish cakes	½ - 1 (90g) fish cake	1 and 4
Fish fingers	1 - 2 fish fingers	4 and 5
Fish and potato pie	2 - 6 tablespoons	1 and 4

PASTA DISHES	Range of portion sizes	Food groups
Lasagne (meat)	2 - 5 tablespoons	1 and 4
Lasagne (vegetable)	2 - 5 tablespoons	1 and 2
Macaroni cheese	2 - 5 tablespoons	1 and 3
Ravioli (meat)	2 - 5 large pieces	1 and 4
Ravioli (vegetable)	2 - 5 large pieces	1 and 2
Spaghetti bolognese	3 - 5 tablespoons	1 and 4

PIZZAS	Range of portion sizes	Food groups
Pizza (meat / vegetable / cheese toppings)	1 - 2 small slices / ¼ - 1 'mini' (70g) pizza	1, 3 and 4
Pizza (vegetarian toppings)	1 - 2 small slices / ¼ - 1 'mini' (70g) pizza	1 and 3



3 tablespoons of macaroni cheese.

PIES AND PASTRY	Range of portion sizes	Food groups
Shepherds pie / cottage pie	2 - 5 tablespoons	1 and 4
Meat pie in pastry	2 - 4 tablespoons	1, 4 and 5
Meat pasty	¼ - ⅓ pasty	1, 4 and 5
Mini sausage rolls	1 - 3 mini sausage rolls	1, 4 and 5
Toad in the Hole	½ - 1 small	1, 4 and 5
Quiche	½ - 1 ½ small slices (30-90g)	1, 3, 4 and 5
Samosas (meat)	½ - 1 samosa or 1 - 2 small samosas	1, 4 and 5
Samosas (vegetable)	½ - 1 samosa or 1 - 2 small samosas	1, 2 and 5
Yorkshire pudding	½ - 1 individual Yorkshire pudding	1 and 3

SOUPS	Range of portion sizes	Food groups
Homemade vegetable soup with meat / fish / lentils / beans	1 small bowl (90 - 125ml)	2 and 4
Homemade minestrone soup	1 small bowl (90 - 125ml)	1 and 4

## DRINKS

Offer toddlers a drink with each meal and snack. 3 - 4oz or 100 - 120ml is about right. Water is the best choice. If used, fruit juices and sugar sweetened squashes should be well diluted with water and limited to once a week (page 9). Undiluted fruit juices and smoothies are very high sugar foods and could be included as a sweet pudding at a meal and limited as on page 8.

## STANDARD MEASURES

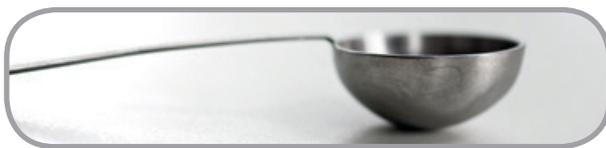
The diameters of the plates and bowls photographed for this Factsheet are as follows:

- White plate: 9" / 23cm (approx)
- White bowl: 6 1/2" / 16.5cm (approx)
- Glass bowl: 4 3/4" / 12cm (approx)

Household spoons vary in size: tablespoons are about 15ml and teaspoons are about 5ml, but can be less. In calculating portions sizes for this Factsheet, measuring spoons were used.

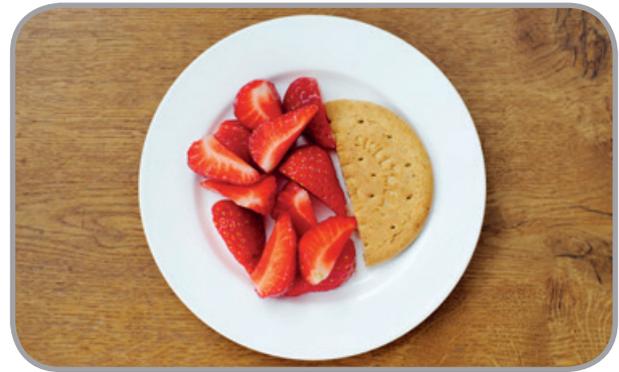


A set of measuring spoons, including a tablespoon (15ml) and a teaspoon (5ml).



A tablespoon (15ml).

## QUICK NUTRITIOUS PUDDINGS OR ONLY ONE SNACK PER DAY



Half plain digestive and strawberries.



Crispbread, cheddar cheese cubes and 3 slices of apple.



Madeira cake and raspberries.

### References

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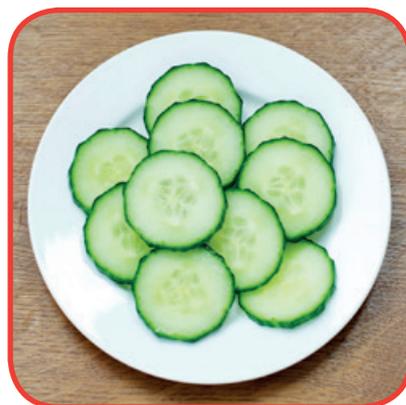
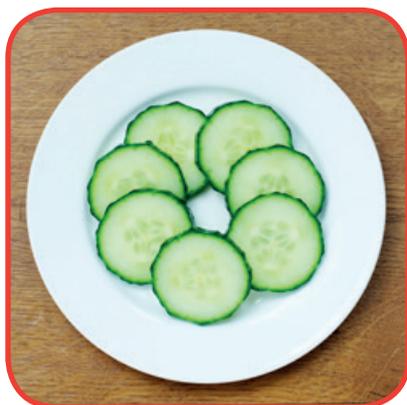
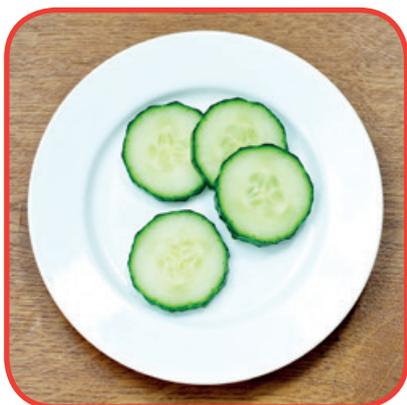
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The portion sizes listed in these tables are designed as a handy guide for healthcare professionals to advise parents and carers of young children. They will not be appropriate for young children with certain medical conditions or faltering growth, who will require the omission and/or addition of specific foods. This Factsheet should be used alongside others on healthy eating for young children. [See Factsheet 1.1- 1.9](#)

## PORTION SIZE RANGES FOR 1-4 YEARS



*Chips*



*Cucumber*



*Onion bhaji*

